

'TOTAL ENVIRONMENT' FOCUSES ON PEOPLE'S NEEDS

Walter J. Hickel, who served as Secretary of the Interior under President Nixon, was known for his candor and incisiveness. He hasn't lost either, as his reflections on the current state of Interior's relations with the American people, particularly Alaskans, amply demonstrate.

Walter J. Hickel

As I look back to 1970 and my 22 months as Secretary of the Interior, I believe the role we played then—and the Department plays now—as the “owners’ representative” has changed.

The Department has a spirited staff and a constituency dedicated to use and protect publicly owned lands and resources. During my tenure we were hit with a rude national awakening to the need to care for our environment as a result of the Santa Barbara [offshore oil well] blow-out and the first Earth Day. Over time, we empowered our entire government to advance environmental protection.

Now, 30 years later, I am convinced that we must care passionately about the environment, but with a wider understanding for what I call the total environment. What do I mean by the “total environment?” I summed it up at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio as the need to care for people, people’s needs, and nature in that order. Ignore one part and all three fail.

To care about the total requires a total mandate. That job was easier before the Department of the Interior was dismembered—sometimes by its own success.

For example, as U.S. western territories became states, the Department lost much of its historical role of promoting people’s needs—i.e., development and self-determination in the West. The role the Department provides today for tribes was once extended to civil government as well. Territories—from Puerto Rico to Guam, Alaska to New Mexico—once had an advocate in the Department of the Interior. For the most part now, states don’t.

Secondly, relatively recently, the Department had many of the combined responsibilities of what is now the Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, and Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). When President **Richard Nixon** and the Congress decided to divide these responsibilities, the Department lost more of its ability to bring all factors of a decision to the table.

Today, jurisdiction for water quality is separate from water quantity, hydropower needs, or fish protection. Decisions to explore for oil are separate from energy security policy. Commercial fisheries are managed separately from other species in the food chain. With that, how can the owners’ representative do the right thing?



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The Department will succeed with the view that conservation is appreciation, not lockup. Sustainable use requires prudence, not denial. People need resources today and they always will.

As an Alaskan, the state of our northern “commons” has become a major focus of my thought and energy. Interior used to own all of us, and statehood for Alaska was never intended to abandon the “total” approach. But it has.

We never forget that we entered the Union in response to promises made by Secretary of the Interior **Fred Seaton** that we’d work together to meet Alaska’s potential. Unfortunately, promises made at the time of statehood have been ignored, in fact violated.

Secretary Seaton and the Congress of the time understood we would come into the Union by a compact that could not be changed by one party alone. To accomplish this economic mission, we were let in with the right to select 104 million acres, and were given 90 percent of federal revenues from mineral leasing on vacant, unappro-

propriated, unreserved land. For self-determination, like other states, we were given control of fish and game.

Over the years, Congress has seen fit to unilaterally take many of these things away, without the agreement of Alaskans. And for the most part, Interior’s relations with the state has become “us vs. them.” Unilateral actions to freeze land selections, set aside land for conservation units, deny access, and usurp control of fish and game have served single minded—though sometimes high-minded—goals. They have not advanced self-determination or democracy, development or self-sufficiency. They have violated a compact that the Interior Department’s lawyers now say they can’t define.

Instead of a total approach, we have conservation units without a plan for access to valuable resources. We have pending federal management of fish and game for subsistence but state management for sustained yield.

Alaska is home for most of the Interior Department’s land, but its concerns are not unique. All westerners are glad for their franchise to vote. But many would echo the title of the 1956 speech given by Alaska’s late Senator **Ernest Gruening**, once the highest Interior Department official for territories: “Let us now end American colonialism.”

End colonialism, yes. But return to the root of caring for the total.

I still believe that Interior has the greatest federal mandate to care for the commons, America’s vast natural resource assets. Public lands, mostly in the West, are the size of six Californias. The continental shelf is much more. Fish, wildlife, land, air, and water and the mineral rights: most of these assets are still the Department’s responsibility.

I like to say that when I was there, Interior was the most exciting department in government. With a “total” approach, it will reclaim that reputation.



Now, to do it right requires a team approach—states and the nation, public and private, even a “mini-cabinet” of agencies working hand in hand. When that doesn’t happen, our national policy is in danger of becoming too narrow and fragmented—blowing with political winds rather than meeting the owners’ needs.

After Exxon Valdez, a team of federal and state trustees took a “total” approach with our \$1 billion settlement. We both restored and enhanced the affected area. Not only have we acquired habitat for protection, but we’ve also built a major research facility—the Alaska Sea Life Center—to be backed, I hope, by a long-term program, to understand what we own so it can be used wisely.

Provided by former Secretary Walter J. Hickel